

An Anecdotal Account of Certain Texas Public Schools in the First Half of
the Twentieth Century

By Robert Cowser

According to the Texas Almanac for 2013, the state legislature in 1870 passed a law making public school attendance compulsory. The required length of a school term was four months. One quarter of Texas' revenue was to go toward paying the expenses of public education.



My father, who began school circa 1900 at the Round Knob School in Hopkins County, never stated exactly the length of the school term, but from other information he gave me about his daily work in the fields in the spring and in the fall when he was a young boy, I deduce that, like other rural schools in the area, the term at

Round Knob School was probably no longer than four months. (The official name of the school was Stout's Creek School.)

My mother, Lola Wardrup Cowser, attended the Greenwood Academy, two miles from my grandparents' farm. The years she attended the school were from 1904 until 1911. That school was founded in 1869. For the first few years the building stood the Baptists held services there. Della Hopkins of the Flora Community was one of my mother's teachers.

According to the Agricultural Census of Texas reported in 1887, the average wage paid white male teachers was \$50, and the average wage paid white females was \$40. The average wages were the same for the black teachers. The supposition is that the amount covered the entire school term, which was 82 days in length (on average). The total tuition revenue from all sources was \$8,481.79.

Prior to the organization of school districts with a tax base, many of the community schools were subscription schools. According to Wallace K. Hooker, one of John Wharton's descendants, Wharton taught a subscription school near Midlothian (Ellis County) from June 17 through Sept., 1895. He was paid \$66 for 2 ¾ months of teaching. Later Wharton taught at Buena Vista School near Waxahachie three successive terms (1897-1900), earning \$50 per month.

In *This Stubborn Soil* and in *A Season of Weathering*, William A. Owens, a native of Lamar County, writes of his harsh experiences as a pupil in the Pin Hook community during the first and second decades of the twentieth century. He attended the school through the eighth grade and then when he completed requirements for a teaching certificate, he returned to Pin Hook to teach in the one-teacher school. The families there were some of the poorest in the state.

In 1915, with Gov. Jim Ferguson's encouragement, the Texas legislature passed a compulsory attendance law. Ferguson supported a rural aid fund for schools. Free textbooks were made available after passage of a law in 1918 while W.P. Hobby was governor.

The Legislature approved a bill that increased the apportionment of school funds from \$11.50 per capita to \$15.00. Governor Miriam Ferguson signed the bill.

According to Robert Caro in *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* Vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), Lyndon Johnson earned \$125 a month as a teacher in the "Mexican School" in Cotulla, TX. (1928-29). Welhausen School, the school's official name, was located across the Missouri Pacific tracks from the Anglo section of the town. More than 75% of the citizens in the town were of Mexican descent. The salary Johnson earned was a higher salary than the salaries paid throughout most of the state because it was difficult to find teachers who would teach in a Mexican school. Johnson had studied three years at Southwest Texas State Teachers College where he earned a teaching certificate. He was twenty years old. He ran out of funds to pay tuition and living expenses for his fourth year of college, so he took a teaching job. (pp. 164-167)

In 1929 the Saltillo School district in Hopkins County approved a bond issue allowing the district to construct a new building. During the next two years, because of

the stock market crash on Wall Street, many banks failed, including the bank at Saltillo. The School was not able to pay the teachers' full salaries during the 1931-32 year. George Blaylock taught at Saltillo from 1927 until 1934. In 1935 the County Superintendent mailed Blaylock a check for \$32.00 to compensate for Blaylock's not having been paid for three weeks at some time during his appointment when he taught without pay. ("In the Connection: The History of the Extended family of George Gallagher" Web) Blaylock had left the Saltillo School in order to teach in the Posey School a few miles from Saltillo for one year before he moved his family to Dallas. There he became an insurance salesman.

In 1937 the average monthly salary for men teachers in Hopkins County was \$118, and for women, \$83. For the 1938-39 academic year at the Saltillo School in Hopkins County, the superintendent was paid \$100 per month and was provided a house rent free. Each of the other 10 teachers, whether male and female, was paid \$90 per month. All had at least a bachelor's degree.

As a teacher at the Big Sandy High School (Upshur County) with a master's degree, I earned \$3,030 during the 1954-55 school year, my first year of teaching.. I was paid in twelve installments. The automatic increment provided by the Gilmer-Aikin Bill, passed by the state legislature shortly after WWII, increased my salary for the second year by \$54. During the 1956-57 school year I taught at the Longview High School (Gregg County) for a salary of \$3,500.

SOURCES : June Tuck of the Hopkins County Historical Society; Roy Cowser; Dr. Wallace Hooker, The Gerald Gallagher Extended Family Website, Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson, two of three volumes of William A .Owens' autobiography, The Sulphur Springs *Daily News-Telegram* for October 6, 1926, and the Franklin County Historical Association Newsletter for January, 2018.

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